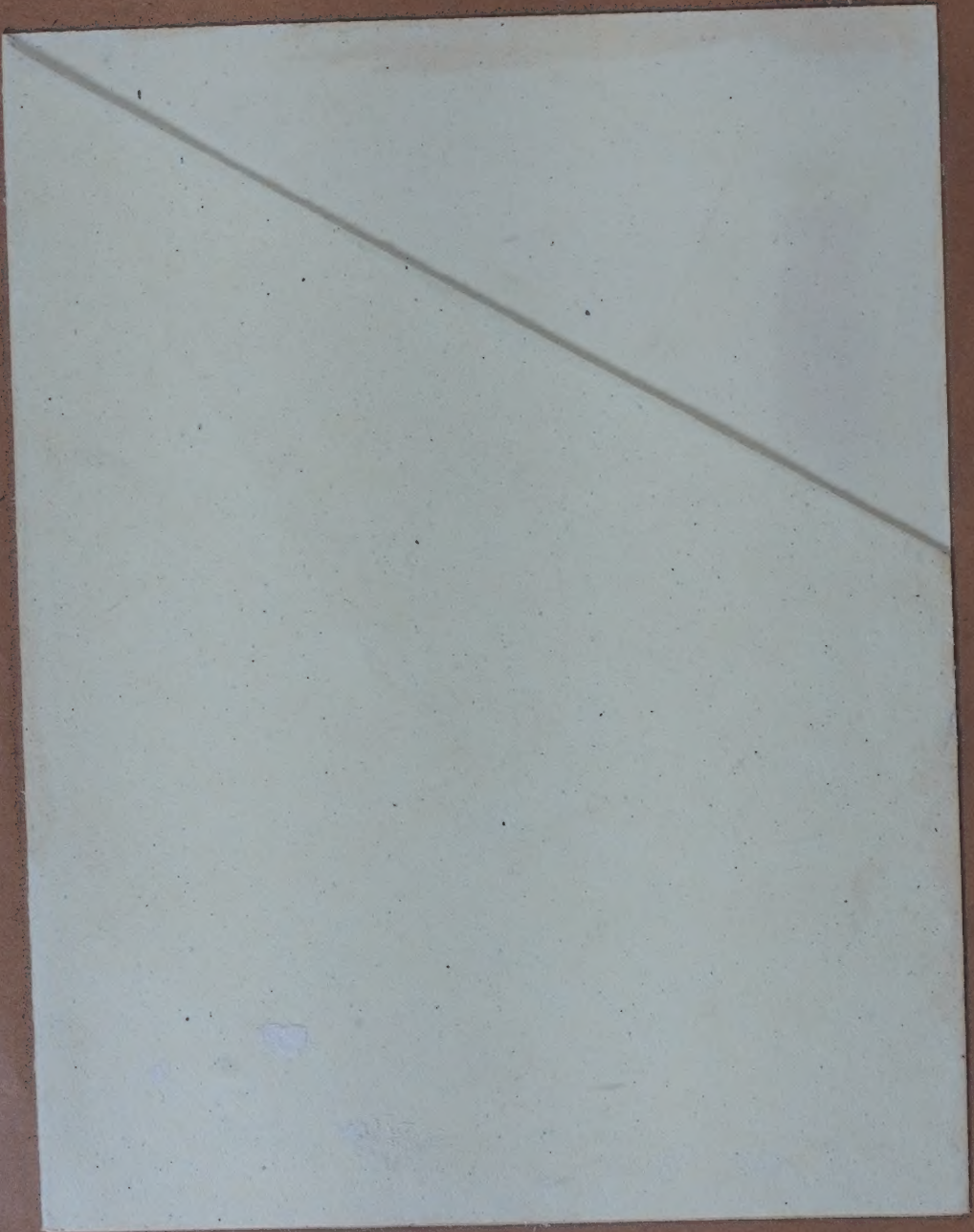


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**THE PLACE AND LEADERSHIP ROLE OF LAY
PEOPLE IN THE WORLD AND IN THE CHURCH**
(According to II Vatican Council)

Fr. Paul Leon

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THE PLACE AND LEADERSHIP ROLE OF LAY PEOPLE IN THE WORLD AND IN THE CHURCH

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The Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the major ecclesial event of the twentieth century, constitutes an earnest attempt of the Church to understand her self-identity, her inner life and her mission to the world. A deeper appreciation of the nature of the Church and her active presence in the modern world necessarily called for a renewed theological vision of the Christian layman as member of the Church in the world of today, his specific apostolate and function consequent upon such membership.

A theological understanding of the laity and their leadership apostolate is to be found mainly in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (LG) and the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* (AA). But many important aspects of the role of the laity have also been treated extensively in other Conciliar documents such as the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (GS), *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (SC), *Decree on Ecumenism* (UR), *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity* (AG) and *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (NA).

The following notes are but a brief summary of the rich doctrinal content of Vat. II intended to highlight some of the main aspects of lay leadership apostolate in the Church and in the World.

I. A layman is a man of the Church, a member of the People of God

Koramangala
Bangalore-560034
India

LG devotes an entire chapter to the description of the Church as the 'new people of God'. This title, solidly founded in scripture, puts greater emphasis on the human and communitary side of the Church, rather than on the institutional and hierarchical aspects which have sometimes been overstressed in the past for polemical reasons. While everything said about the people of God as a whole is applicable to the laity, the term '*People of God*' refers to the total community of the Church, including the pastors as well as the other faithful.

The terms lay, layman and laity are all derived ultimately from the Greek *o laos*, the people. But the rich scriptural background of these terms has been recovered by Vat. II where the laity is described *negatively* as "all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those in a religious state especially approved by the Church" (LG. 31). This description is immediately complemented by an emphatic declaration of the positive implications of the term: laymen are believers in Christ, baptized persons, members of the people of God and sharing in Christ's office as priest, prophet and king; furthermore, and specifically they share in that office in a particular manner and carry out the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world in their own way.

The "*faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ*" (LG. 31). No mere extrinsic and static consecration is effected by the sacrament but an intimate union with Christ the head of the Body and dynamic union with Christ and with all the other members of that Body. At the same time, this transcendent union of head and members constitutes a visible society, hierarchically structured, to mediate the word, the will, and the grace of God in the Church and in the world.

Within this visible Church there is a diversity of roles; there are bishops, clerics, religious, laymen; but *all the Christians "share a true equality with regard to the dignity and activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the body of Christ"* (LG. 32).

II. What is the Lay Apostolate?

The lay apostolate is "*a participation in the saving mission of the Church itself*" (LG. 33). The lay apostolate according to some earlier conceptions had been limited to a cooperation of the laity in the apostolic tasks proper to the hierarchy. LG and AA make it clear that while laymen may laudably assist in the hierarchical apostolate as collaborators, the term "*lay apostolate*" refers primarily to apostolic tasks pertaining to the laity as such.

Since "by its very nature the Christian Vocation is also a vocation to the apostolate" (AA 2), it embraces clerics and laity and the operation of both in the Church and in the world, as well as their activity as citizens of this world.

But the specific character of lay apostolate consists in its being "secular". "*A secular quality is proper and special to laymen*" (LG 31) both in the world and in the Church.

A central question discussed in the Council was: when could something be called an apostolate? To what extent has the activity of the Christian in the world, whose direct goal was of a profane and temporal nature, an apostolic character and hence could be called an apostolate? Is it sufficient that the Christian carries out his activities in the world according to objective laws placed in things by God or whether they should be infused with a subjective apostolic spirit made manifest concretely?

The Council, in the face of opposition from many of the Fathers, held fast to the conviction that the worldly activities of the Christian, as a penetration of temporal things

with the Christian spirit, represent a participation in the mission of the Church and are thus part of the apostolate, just like prayer uttered with an apostolic intention or acts of mortification which are performed in such a spirit.

The soul of the apostolate is love; the apostolate exists through love. Its ultimate source lies in the inner trinitarian bosom of the Father manifesting his saving love through Jesus and Apostle. The Christian is therefore called upon to love his brethren unconditionally (1 Jn. 3: 16). The love of God poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5: 1) calls for genuine concern for others. It is not a mere individualistic and private union of the soul with the "bridegroom" but a dynamic and outgoing power communicated to us in baptism and confirmation and continually renewed in the Eucharist.

The Church is essentially *a community of those who believe, hope, and love.* But the Christian vocation to apostolate is always realised concretely in the individual Christian, according to his personality, his personal and immediate social situation, and according to his profession, his position in the Church and in society. *The Spirit and his gifts* allotted to everyone, even the less dramatic ones, form the foundation of all apostolic activity (AA 3).

It is of great significance that the Council kept to the use of the word 'apostolate' in connection with the laity, and indeed, for a very well-founded and comprehensive reason, and that it did not simply identify this with the apostolic office of the NT writings. *The Council considered laity in terms of that mission which proceeded from the Father, who sent his Son into the world "that the world might be saved through him", that mission for the witness of which and participation in which Christ determined the Church as a whole.*

III. Threefold Participation of the laity in the mission of Christ

Through baptism and confirmation the laity are in their own way sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ which is continued in his Church.

—Christ, the eternal and supreme Priest, gives the faithful a share in his priestly function of offering spiritual worship for the glory of God and the salvation of men. Vivified by the Spirit of Christ the apostolic endeavour, daily labour and hardship can become an act of spiritual worship, absorbed into the sacrifice of Christ. They even help consecrate the world to God and help achieve the two ends of worship: the glorification of God and the salvation of men.

—Christ fulfils his prophetic office not only through the hierarchy but also through the laity. Empowered by the Spirit they are to be witness of Christ and keep alive the eschatological hope “even in the framework of secular life.” Through and uncompromising confession of faith and explicit witness of the Word the laity help build up the kingdom of Christ.

—Christ shares his kingship with all the faithful through his victory over sin and death. The entire created world is to be so ordered and healed from the wound of sin that it may obtain the royal freedom of the Son of God. To serve Christ is to reign.

IV. The goals of the apostolate of the laity

The mission of Christ carried out through the Church and in which the laity participate in their own way is two-fold: (a) by spreading the kingdom of Christ over all the earth all men are to share in Christ's saving redemption; (b) through these men who are partakers of that redemption the whole world is to be ordered in relation to Christ.

The Council avoided two extreme tendencies: the one tended to consider the apostolate of the laity as limited to the Christian orientation of the temporal order and sharply distinguished from the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. The other extreme was bent upon bringing the apostolate of the laity under the direct support and authority of the hierarchical apostolate, thus imposing on the world an "ecclesiastical" or even worse "clerical" civilization.

A. *The mission of the Church, and therefore the apostolate of the laity, primarily and directly concerns the salvation of men imparted to us in faith and grace (Eph. 2:8).* Faith not only takes its origin in grace, it is grace itself and through it one already possesses salvation. The ministry of the Word and Sacrament mediating faith and grace is entrusted in a special way to the clergy but here "the laity too have their very important role to play if they are to be fellow-workers for the truth (3 Jn. 8)" (AA 6).

The apostolic service of evangelization is more direct than that of sanctification. We can and we must proclaim the Gospel of Jesus, but only God can sanctify, for to sanctify means to give the very life and love of God himself.

The Council "earnestly exhorts the laity, each according to his natural gifts and learning" (AA 6) to be active in examining the Christian principles of revelation, in defending them in new situations, and in confronting new problems and the respective application of Christian principles to those varied and changing problems of our time.

The laity can greatly contribute towards an effective ministry of the pastors. It is the laity who must give to the pastors the images, the language and the vision of the world which the latter are to use.

B. *The second goal of the apostolate of the laity is "the Christian orientation of the temporal order"*. It is pointed out first of all that even the worldly tasks of the Christians, the formation and perfecting of the temporal order, therefore the temporal goods of life, the family, culture, business, art, the career-world, the political and social institutions are in themselves not a direct apostolic task. They are rather tasks which are given to the Christian in common with all other men according to the plan of God.

They are not simply means for the attainment of the final goal of man but contain an intrinsic value in themselves, especially in relation to the human person. Thus any form of Manichaeian dualism is rejected. In the redemptive order, moreover, the whole cosmos has been brought together and united in Christ.

But the reality of sin is ever present. Hence in the restoration of the temporal order there is a double task: one is concerned with the healing of those wounds in the temporal order which come from sin and the other which is concerned with a positive approach opening this order to Christian values. All this is referred to as "constructing the temporal order rightly and orienting it to God through Christ". It is a human-Christian task.

"The laity must take on the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation" (AA 7).

The Council makes a particular mention of those apostolic tasks which are especially vivid expressions of charity (AA 8).

V. The various fields of the Apostolate of the Laity

A. *Church Communities*: The parish, diocese and the entire Church constitute the first field of apostolic activity in which the laity are to exercise, directly their priestly, prophetic and royal participation in the Church's mission of evangelization and sanctification.

The parish is the "small cell" or nucleus of the whole Church (AA 11) and as such the parish activity is the prototype for a common apostolate. Some particular tasks are:

- participation in the apostolic work of the community
- the work of leading back those who are far removed from the Church
- proclamation of the Word especially in catechetical instruction
- the offering of special professional skills of laymen in the pastoral care and parish administration
- active participation in the liturgy
- proclamation through word and example in the family.

B. *The apostolate of married persons and of the family*: The married couple are to be "champions of the faith" and "witnesses of the faith". For their children they should be "the first to proclaim the faith and rear them in it".

The Christian family should not only be a school for the faith but a school for the apostolate as well.

The apostolate of the family, nevertheless, reaches far beyond the immediate circle of the family. A family is the "domestic sanctuary of the Church" in that it represents an imitation of the mystery of the relation of Christ to his Church (Eph. 5:32) (AA 11).

The Council stresses the special role of the family in "newly established Churches".

C. *The apostolate of the youth:* This should correspond to the changed social, economic and cultural conditions of today. The youth can be powerful witnesses of faith in this changing world.

D. *The apostolate of the social milieu:* It consists of the effort to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the community in which a person lives. In the sphere of work or leisure, school, the family or residential district, or one's chosen companions the laymen have a special opportunity to serve their brethren.

E. *The national and international fields:* Love for one's country, the loyal fulfilment of civic obligations and of justice, the formation of the true common weal, a personal contribution towards the formation of a healthy and vigorous public opinion, a corresponding influence on legislature affecting public welfare and morality.

Those possessing special professional skills and knowledge should willingly take up responsibility, dialogue with all men and work towards socialization.

VI. Various methods of lay apostolate

The laity can engage in their apostolic activity either as individuals or as members of various groups or associations.

A. *The apostolate of the individual Christian* is the origin and condition of the whole lay apostolate. The Council proposes the witness of lay-life in the world, founded on faith, hope and love as the highest form of apostolate appropriate at the present time.

B. *The apostolate practised in community* is of great importance not only because of its greater efficacy but also

because the Church is a community Church—the People of God and the Body of Christ. It gives the individual support, facilitates the formation for the apostolate as well as its planning and direction.

Laymen devoting themselves and their professional skills either permanently or temporarily should be encouraged and supported. They include teachers of religion, assistants in pastoral care, fulltime officials in lay apostolic associations and in Church administration, catechists, mission doctors, social and development helpers, etc.

Lay apostolate organisations that closely collaborate with the hierarchy and approved as such by the same may be called “Catholic Action” (AA 21).

VII. Lay apostolate in the total mission of the Church

Whether lay apostolate is exercised by the faithful as individuals or as members of organisations, it should be incorporated into the apostolate of the whole Church according to a right system of relationships. All the forms of the one apostolate of the Church must be infused with the spirit of unity, fraternal charity and mutual esteem.

The Council also recommends “the cooperation of Catholics with other Christians” and “cooperation between Christians pursuing apostolic aims and men who do not profess Christ’s name but acknowledge these values (AA 27).

The cooperation of Catholics with other Christians cannot be limited to “orienting the temporal order” but should express the “common profession of faith in God and in Jesus Christ before non-Christians, in so far as there is a common foundation for it” (AG 15).

What about the cooperation with non-Christians? Though it may not pertain to the apostolic work of *direct* evangeliza-

COMMUNITY HEALTH CELL
326, V Main, 1 Block 11
Koramangala
Bangalore-560034
India

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tion and sanctification it cannot, however, be restricted to mere "restoration of the temporal order" for in the present economy of salvation the redeeming grace of Christ is already at work. We may therefore speak about a *true* Christian penetration of the temporal order aimed in cooperation with non-Christians.

VIII. Formation for the Lay Apostolate and Lay Leadership in the Church

The apostolic formation of the laity receives its special character from the secular character of laymen and their spirituality. A spiritual formation must include a human formation to make them mature persons in theory and practice.

Training for the apostolate should start with the child's earliest education in the Christian family.

A special type of formation is proposed for the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification in which the laity are to engage in conversation with others, whether they be believers or non-believers "in order to manifest Christ's message to all men" (AA 31).

"With respect to the Christian renewal of the temporal order, laymen should be instructed in the true meaning and value of temporal things, both in themselves and in their relation to the total fulfilment of the human person" (AA 31).

Laymen are invited not only to "apply" the conclusions of the social doctrine of the Church but also "advance this doctrine".

Apostolic formation should also lead to the performance of works of charity and mercy which afford "the most striking testimony of the Christian life".

Finally, the Council earnestly entreats layman to follow the call of the apostolate gladly and generously. A special appeal is made to the younger generations (AA 33).

